

Vermont State Technical Committee Meeting

September 28, 2016, Colchester VT

ATTENDEES

Obe Racicot, NRCS	Amy Overstreet, NRCS
Meeting chaired by: Vicky Drew, NRCS	Kim Peck, FSA
Kip Potter, NRCS	Nate Hamilton, NRCS
Reed Sims, NRCS	Eric Perkins, EPA
Bob Sylvester, NRCS	Dave Blodgett, NRCS
Jeff Cook, VAAFM	Jill Arace, VACD
Rick Hopkins, VT DEC	Ryan Patch, VAFM (phone)
Jeff Carter, UVM	Kimberly Peck, FSA
Jeff Sanders, UVM	Jeff Farber, VACD
Alli Compagna, VT DEC	Nancy Everhart, VHCB
Mary Jo Feuerbach, EPA (phone)	Laura DiPietro, VAAFM
Tom Berry, office of Senator Leahy	Kirsten Workman, UVM Ext
John Austin, VT Fish & Wildlife (phone)	Liz Royer, VT RWA
Mike Middleman, VAAFM (phone)	Chris Smith, USF&WS
Marli Rupe, VT DEC (phone)	Dave Adams, VT F&W
Sam Smith, Intervale	

Welcome and Intro from Vicky Drew, VT NRCS State Conservationist

- ✓ We will display a series of maps today that help reflect our accomplishments over the past year. I am very proud of our work this year. We had more money in VT than ever and also went through the year with *many* vacancies. Update on staffing: we had 4 entry level positions we advertised and couldn't fill. Kept going down list and all selectees declined to work in VT due to cost of living. We are challenged with filling positions. Need to forge better relationships with schools so we can recruit there. Also have a recruiting event in Puerto Rico this week. Our Williston and St. Albans positions are advertised now. Cost of living is a negative for Vermont and for filling positions. There were 3 candidates for a GS-13 position (to fill behind Carol) and the selectee declined so back to drawing board. We also recently lost our legal instruments examiner due to cost of living. Please help us recruit and support getting word out for NRCS jobs. [USA Jobs](#) is a good resource to keep an eye on jobs. They are generally only open for five

days. Tom Berry suggested sending out an email to this committee when vacancies are announced. **ACTION: Amy will share future VT vacancies with the committee.** Jeff Farber said his strategy is to go to schools in New England that have ag programs. Vicky said we do that and we go to recruitment fairs but we have very specific requirements for eligibility for our jobs and students must make sure they have 12 hours of plant/soil science and 30 other hours in another science. Currently we have 9 vacancies, 2 upcoming retirements which leaves big gaps. We have filled the easement specialist positions--starts Monday with Jason Fleury.

- ✓ First time in 8 years for a change in administration, which will include Sec. Vilsack. This could cause a change in initiatives as well—all subject to change. We've had a focus on high tunnels, organics, working lands for wildlife, etc. but this may change in the new administration.
- ✓ RCPP deadline for final proposals was Sept. 19. 2 were submitted in VT. One national and one state level. Waiting to hear if they were approved for funding. Should know in December.
- ✓ We also had 4 Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) projects we approved. Vicky distributed a handout on the approved projects. You can read more about them [here](#). Can't start work until we have signed agreements
- ✓ Vicky updated the committee on two new prioritized watersheds. They are East Creek and Hungerford Brook. B/c of accelerated funding we have now, we need to keep our planning in Lake Champlain Basin. 50% of dollars have gone to prioritized watersheds. We will be backing off \$'s to the 1st four prioritized watersheds, as work progresses and adding funds to the new two. Strategic planning approach is key. The national office has recognized that this is important. So VT NRCS has submitted a funding request for more funding for these 2 new watersheds, which could help hire some contractors and/or expand our work with partners. Don't know if NRCS will get the funding (over \$100,000/watershed) yet or not. Stay tuned.

Tom Berry-legislative update: Chatter about end of FY and shutdown. NO real angst over this among congressional staff. Continuing resolution until early December. Next Farm Bill-Senator Stabenow's urban ag bill to address diversified ag. Next Farm Bill will be in place by Sept. 2018. Energy Bill-being conferenced. Welch and Sanders are on conference committee. Laura DiPietro wanted to know how to get involved, how to enter the discussion about the next Farm Bill—set up meetings; who wants to be involved? Tom said his office would set up some listening sessions in the new year. He said conversations among partners should happen and he would be happy to help. Laura said to send her an [email](#) if folks wanted to discuss and coordinate.

Kim Peck-FSA Update: FSA has a political appointee at the helm, Bob Paquin, and he is retiring at the end of the year. Staffing changes at FSA: County Ex. Director Brenda Ladue retired; Paul Remillard is acting CED. FSA advertised that position nationally to replace Brenda and got no applicants. FSA plans to repost with relocation expenses. Kim echoed what Vicky said about the difficulty in filling positions. Middlebury vacancy for CED was filled by Pam Smith. Farm Loan positions, Brian Cooper was a Newport manager who retired and Dorcas McAllister is acting and we have hired 2 new farm loan officer trainees, both veterans, one in St. Albans and one training in Newport but eventually to be in White River Junction office. Conservation programs: Emergency Conservation Program implemented in Franklin County for maple sugar makers impacted by July wind storm. FSA has an announcement out now for those impacted. Franklin County approved and we have a request in from Windsor County for same storm and waiting for approval.

FSA has received isolated reports of producers with dry wells, who are hauling water, but they are not able to offer programs that can help with that because the eligibility thresholds are not yet met. Only option is emergency loan, but many don't want that. A few contiguous counties are eligible for these emergency loans due to drought.

CRP and CREP: lots of expirations and re-enrollment. FSA and NRCS have been training staff to work on planning, develop standards, practice eligibility, developed FY 17 new cost share rates and average cost for CREP 2017 contracts. She has a copy of the draft cost table. Why producers didn't re-enroll? 57 contracts that were expiring and 36% did not reenroll. Lots of reasons. Some wanted to develop land, graze buffers, crop grass filter strips, didn't feel like program was worthwhile; lots of different reasons, but all were approached and consulted. This year NRCS and FSA staff will meet in Oct to better forecast the work in FY 2017. For FY 16, we had 15 new contracts and 143 acres and so far in 17, we have 31 contracts and 420 acres.

FY 2017 and CRP 2014 Farm Bill had a new acreage cap for CRP enrollment. It's now 24 million acres nationally. Max allowed under CRP. There is a general sign up CRP, continuous signup, and new CRP grassland program. Some producers are not interested in enrolling, or continuing expired contracts, but we are at an unprecedented situation where in July that cap was almost met. FSA and NRCS have been told to pause activity on CRP until as a Dept., they can figure out acreage enrollment. Everyone that reenrolled in Vermont was accepted. Kim polled offices and we are already working on 17 new contracts (another 100 acres) so we are anxious to hear how the program will move forward. FSA and NRCS are not working on potential new contracts at this time until we learn more. Partners are advised to do the same. Chris Smith asked how many were not eligible for re-enrollment. She said a few were not. Some reenrolled with decreased acreage. But reenrollment standards provided specific guidelines for eligibility.

NRCS Programs Update for 2016: Obe Racicot

Refer to attachments in email sent on Sept. 27th

Disclaimer: there is no central NRCS database. There are a number of different databases that we pull from. The Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy tool (REAP) is the central database for official program numbers. There others are informal number (ProTracts—manages money; only breaks down at county level/IDEA breaks down at watershed level but does not tie to \$). Easements is its own separate database. Here is some [more info. about the different types of data tools](#) that NRCS uses. In addition, some numbers are reported in Fiscal Year, some calendar year. So, if you see discrepancies in what is presented, this is why. Things are constantly changing. The national office is trying to sync all this info, but it hasn't happened yet. Reed uses one tool, Kip uses another, Obe uses one, and so we all use different tools.

1. **Obe showed the annual breakdown of money obligated/number of contracts/** (refer to chart on page 2 of handout--orange and yellow chart with leaves). VT NRCS got EQIP allocation of \$11.3 million and later got \$894,000 more so we got total of \$12.2 million. They obligated a total of \$10.6 million. Surplus of \$1.6 million (lots of big dollar contracts backed out at last minute). Obe pointed out that they made watershed plans, and the program funding cycle for 2017 will look similar. No applications in Rock River watershed farmstead, so we didn't obligate anything. Overall, we had planned around 75% of our EQIP money going to Lake Champlain, which didn't happen and we ended up allocating 65% to the lake and 35% rest of state. Lots of Conservation Activity Plans (CAP's) funded (130 of them). No certified organic, transition to organic apps. Lots of farmstead interest outside of priority watersheds. Vicky said we grouped money within 4 priority watersheds, and then as we got through the 4 watershed funding needs, we took leftover money and put it in rest of Lake Champlain, and then to rest of state. We funded higher ranking projects throughout the rest of the state, per the recommendation of State Tech Committee. We had more farmstead this year than last, and more agronomic.
2. **RCPP related to EQIP:** VACD is working 2 years ahead of schedule. Have done 43 CAPS in 2017. Applauded for that. VT DEC has 2 pools (farmstead and forestry erosion). They got \$850,000 out the door and expect more interest in 2017. They had 19 contracts. We got more money out the door this year overall due to RCPP. AMA is a limited program-we had 6 contracts. Allocated all dollars we were given. CSP is acreage based. We did well—8 contracts and 14,000 acres enrolled.
3. **Types of CAPS through EQIP**-energy, CNMP, nutrient management, and forestry management plans.
4. **2016 EQIP Funding Scoring Breakdown Chart (page 3 of handout)**-Obe explained the EQIP ranking and points allocated through national/state/local rankings. 1000 points max. All CAPS get max number of points. Those almost always get selected. Obe discussed the ranking process. Nancy asked about no interest for organic/transition to organic. Vicky said it was because of the way the program requirements are and so applications generally go into the regular funding pool.
5. **Graph showing shift to funding of agronomic practices (page 6 of handout)**

Reed Sims explained mapping he created to show where practices were installed: maps were made to display practices installed/planned during calendar year 2016, so far. The snapshot was as of Sept. 19th. In January, Reed will have a more complete map, to show you visually what we put on the ground, focusing on the 4 priority watersheds. How did our installation of cover crops compare with other agronomic practices? Approximately twelve percent of applied agronomic practices were cover crops. Reed also developed maps which show where erosion & runoff potential areas are. *McKenzie Brook example* showed what was planned for 2017. Lots of conservation crop rotation going on in the northern part of the watershed. At the end of the calendar year, the maps will be updated to include everything installed between January 1 and December 31, 2016. Maps for each watershed were provided to the committee in the handouts.

Kip Potter delivered a PowerPoint on the progress of 4 targeted watersheds and what was contracted this FY: Phosphorus reduction estimates were calculated for each targeted watershed based on the FY16 contracted practices. The EPA BMP scenario tool was used to provide these estimates. Local

planning teams had previously established P reduction goals for each watershed. It is important to stress that these *are estimates for planning purposes* to see how we are progressing. He showed the goals in a chart (page 19 of the handout), for the 5 year period, what percentage of the TMDL was goal. For each of the four targeted watersheds he showed the major planned practices (ProTracts info) and total estimated P reduction. Farmers are signing up for one year of cover crop at a time, but this creates concerns, and a workload issue for contracting. Obe mentioned a potential policy change where cover crop up to five years (designed to change behavior) could change. Roadblock was b/c farmers didn't know which field they wanted to cover crop several years out. At some point next year, guidance might give more flexibility to do more 5 year contracts. There is a high admin cost to NRCS for one year contracts. That's technical assistance money that could go to other resources. Hopefully it will help get longer contracts. Everyone agreed that it would help. In the plan for McKenzie, they were going to meet 18% of that goal in the first year, and based on reduction, they met 13%. St. Albans goal 20%, contracted 32%; Rock River goal 22%, contracted 9%; Pike River goal 20%, contracted 9%. A lot of farmers in Rock River are doing conservation on their own and so we aren't tracking it. The partner database was discussed. Mike Middleman said that the database should help track what planners are willing to put into it, including practices that aren't tied to NRCS programs, such as what the farmer is implementing on their own. Future Efforts Slide: Not much livestock exclusion this year, and no filter strips, grassed waterways, or riparian buffers in this year's contracts. Nutrient management only planned in one watershed. RCPP is reflected in IDEA data. Kip's data is just based on ProTracts. We have to manage 31 funding pools. IT's challenging. Jeff suggested a survey in each of these watersheds to get a better idea of conservation practices implemented. Via a grant? State inspections will result in a lot of changes in practices applied, signups, etc. Vicky encouraged partners to use the partner database to capture practices, like not spreading manure, so it can be reflected. Can we pilot some geographic areas for the partner database? Mike said the database is developed and hold up is b/c of changes in understanding of what is legal through data sharing in reference to the MOU. VAAFM moved away from adding security feature flexibility, so they have to limit who they give password to, and they need geographic security layers, to restrict access. Before granting access, VAAFM must get security features correct. VAAFM will then be able to give passwords and training once this is done. Jill proposed we focus on one area to make sure it's well covered, that data is entered, to test the database. Laura said UVM extension would be good to align with. 1619 provisions in the farm bill prevent us from releasing info to anyone other than USDA cooperators (partners who provide assistance to USDA to get our work done). UVM must be in an agreement with us, unless farmers gives us a release, so that was an option. At the threat of legal action, we are taking the strict interpretation seriously. You can only use the data to do our work—can't discuss it, share it, etc. VACD right now only has access to where they are working. 1619 puts the responsibility on the partner to protect the data, once it is shared with the partner. The organizations must train their staff about 1619. **ACTION: Vicky asked for a report on the database from Mike to send to all partners. She also suggested entering into agreements with partners to help with the access of the database.**

Update on NRCS Easements Programs in VT-referring to chart on bottom of page 2 of handout. For 2016, lots of easement workload. VHCB got a lot of money and RCPP to DEC- total of 19 projects, 2613 acres, \$2.5 million to VHCB. VT hosted a weeklong national training this summer on easements. VT is well recognized by national office for our easement work. Wetland easements: 3 through state allocation and one through RCPP allocation (has state incentive on top of it). This doesn't count

everything we closed; just enrolled. 23 ag easements. We closed our largest wetland easement to date in Brandon. Almost \$4 million towards easements obligated, 32 parcels and nearly 4000 acres.

ACEP ALE subcommittee on July 21 (minutes have been previously distributed) – During this subcommittee member talked about NRCS soils waiver criteria. All members agreed to continue with the geographic locations agreed to in 2016, being 50% prime requirement to enroll (Champlain Valley and Connecticut River Valley) and allow a waiver down to 35% in the Rest of State. NRCS will issue a general supplement to our manual and inform easement partners. The subcommittee also talked about impervious surface waiver requirements and agreed to stick to the same criteria as in 2016. The formal State Technical Committee was advised to review the proposed ranking for 2017 and if anyone has input into the ranking criteria, let Obe know asap before they are published for 2017 sign-up.

GARCS - Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARC) for wetland easement were reviewed with the State Technical Committee.

Proposals for 2017 were discussed. Three soil categories were established. Should get approved. We are expecting a lot a more interest. We hope to get a lot more wetland projects enrolled this year. Nancy Everhart thanked Obe and his staff for the huge amount of work they accomplished. Our new easement specialist will be key to helping us monitor all these easements which require monitoring for perpetuity.

Conservation Stewardship Program-CSP...underutilized in this state. CSP is oriented toward those that want to go above and beyond, and for those that don't have a resource concern or don't rank out high enough to get into EQIP. EQIP is a fix it program, not a stewardship program. The Chief has put a lot of agency resources into reinventing this program. Previously, it was very complex and confusing. It's been simplified. And delivery is changing too. Matches EQIP now; screening criteria, ranking, enhancements. It's by acre the largest conservation program that NRCS offers. More popular out west. In Vermont, not so popular. You must be meeting 2 resource concerns by NRCS standards and by end of contract, meet a third. Identify a resource concern with a conservation plan. Take it to the next level with CSP. Rules are now more logical. We will offer 190 conservation enhancements. Very wildlife friendly. Lots of pollinator related practices. Signup starts on November 1. National training is next week. Someone suggested reaching out to NOFA Farm Viability to discuss CSP. Discussion ensued about other groups that should be notified and Vicky suggested a kickoff meeting for partners in November **(ACTION: Amy and Obe to work on invitations to Nov. 10 meeting)**. Recently, a CSP subcommittee gathered to identify 5 priority resource concerns: water quality, soil erosion, soil quality, plant health, animals. They also created 4 funding pools: ag land, ag land historically underserved, nonindustrial private forestland, nonindustrial private forest land historically underserved. Then developed ranking questions.

2015 VT NRCS Accomplishments Report-Amy Overstreet distributed and discussed the 2015 annual report and noted that in the future, annual reports will be completed and published in January of each year to reflect program data and success stories from the previous fiscal year. She asked the committee for suggestions and comments on what they would like to see in the report. **ACTION: Please send to her via email by Oct. 15. Someone on the phone asked if it could be sent with the minutes. Visit this link to the see the annual report.**

NEXT MEETINGS: **November 10th and Jan 25th**

Other comments:

- ✓ It was mentioned that UVM Extension Director, Doug Lantagne announced his forthcoming retirement.
- ✓ **Water Quality Partners Meeting for All Employees. SAVE THE DATE:** We are planning a water quality partners meeting for Jan. 13 at VTC in Randolph. All state employees are invited (VHCB, NOFA, VLT, and all tech service providers) to hear about watershed approach, RAP's. Jeff Farber is taking lead for registrations. More info forthcoming.
- ✓ **Long Island Sound RCPP-** Forest land easements through Healthy Forest Reserve Program. New to VT. Five applications were submitted from Vt. All ranked well. At January meeting we will discuss this more.
- ✓ **Jenn Colby sent in this report on the Connecticut River Watershed RCPP:** The UVM team continues to provide technical assistance to farmers in the Connecticut River Watershed. Several technical workshops are planned for October on the subjects of cover crops, interseeding to improve forage and soil health, and pasture management. Recently team members have met with conservation district and NRCS staff in New Hampshire to discuss overlap and coordination. A similar meeting between UVM and UNH is scheduled for mid October. UVM Farm Viability joined the project in July to provide decision-making assistance to farmers around practice costs and benefits.
- ✓ **Laura DiPietro said the RAP's** could be effective by Jan 15th.